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ABSTRACT

Second language educators need to examine in greater depth the learning processes of young children in order to provide them with the kind of teaching they need in order to really learn. This means searching other fields to learn as much as possible about: questioning strategies and the development of critical thinking skills; hemispheric dominance, the right-brained approach to learning, how to meet the needs of children in relation to their hemispheric dominance, and how to help them exercise both hemispheres; visual learners, auditory learners, haptic learners, and how to help each kind; dyslexia, other learning disabilities, and implications for learners in the second language class; and learner-oriented curricula, including how to provide options for individual learning styles, needs, and cultural backgrounds. (MSE)

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What is the Question?

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In the calm of retirement, I have spent much time reflecting about the process of second language teaching-learning, about second language experiences for young children.

At a personal level, I have watched my two granddaughters who have "taken French" since Grade 2. When they were eight and six years old respectively, they spent three months in France where they were enrolled in a French school. They both have friends there, love the French people, the country and the language itself. They have comparable abilities, the same family environment and encouragement, and have attended the same school. The older one has not really liked French classes, but has been very successful and is continuing the study of French in high school. The younger one, in seventh grade, hates French class, is trying but is failing. Why are learning outcomes so different?

I vividly remember my elementary school of so many years ago. I hated art classes! If only I had had a teacher who would have let me - just once in a while - create "my own thing" instead of making me copy from the board an apple or a tree or a cat! (My "result" never pleased the teacher, and I can still feel her cold clammy hand guiding mine to draw what did please her.) If only I had had a teacher who would have asked me what I liked about a masterpiece, what I did not like about it, how I felt when I looked at it, instead of making me learn lists of artists' names in order to match them with the reproductions of their works! Today I can't even draw a good stick figure, and my memory

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blocks on artists' names.

I didn't have any second language experiences in grade school since none was offered. But if I had been put in a foreign language class then, I might well have failed that also, since what I now recognize as my right-brained approach to learning caused me to respond "differently" and to be considered a difficult child.

I can assume, since you are in this assembly, that you are all comfortable in your second language skills. Do you remember how you learned them? Did everyone in your class succeed? Did you have more motivation than others? ..more ability? ..better memory? Did you study harder? ..listen more attentively? ..respond more actively? How did you "feel" about your language class? Did you learn "in spite of" the teacher?

At a professional level, since the failure of FLES I have been among the educators looking for answers, but to what questions? As Gertrude Stein, heavily sedated, lay dying, she murmured to her companion, Alice B. Toklas, "What is the answer?" Not hearing a response, she continued, "In that case, what is the question?" Is that our situation? What kinds of questions do you ask yourself?

What kinds of questions do you ask your learners? How much time do you give them to think about how to respond? Do you have a Little Prince like St. Exupery's who doesn't answer any questions? ..or a Charlie Brown who dreams of doing so well but always misses the boat? ..or a Mary like the one I knew who observed in the fourth grade that she could see how French children could read French and understand what they had read, but how could they think about what they read if they didn't know English? Is there in your class a dyslexic child, undiagnosed? ..one with another learning disability? ..one with a right-brained approach to learning?

Medical and educational research is not at all complete, but it is becoming clearer why some children cannot learn in our educational system. There are both structural and functional differences in the two hemispheres of our brain. All of us use both hemispheres but generally we use one to a greater extent than the other. Both hemispheres have specialized thinking characteristics, and each one processes stimuli in its own unique way; the dominant hemisphere seems to dictate our approach to learning, indeed our approach to life.

In her book Unicorns are Real: A Right-Brained Approach to Learning, Barbara Meister Vitale says, "Much of today's education continues to be dominated by a left-brained curriculum."[1] According to Mrs. Vitale, visual learners, those who understand by visualizing or seeing pictures, are usually processing in the right hemisphere. Auditory learners, those who comprehend by hearing, are usually processing in the left hemisphere. Haptic learners who learn by experience are either right-hemispheric or they alternate from one side to another.[2] When we know how to balance the two hemispheres, when the information from both hemispheres is integrated into a whole, we are reaching for our highest human potential.[3] Is this what we mean when we describe learners as "not working up to their potential"?

Mrs. Vitale has listed some behavorial characteristics displayed by many right-hemispheric children:[4]

1. Appears to daydream.
2. Talks in phrases or leaves words out when talking.

1. Vitale, Barbara Meister. Unicorns are Real: A Right-Brained Approach to Learning, Jalmar Press, Rolling Hills Estate, California, 1985, p. xiv (Introduction).
2. Ibid. p. 6
3. Ibid. p. 107
4. Ibid. pp. 17-19

3. Uses his fingers to count.

4. Draws pictures on the corners of his homework papers or dittos.

5. Has difficulty following directions.

6. Makes faces or uses other forms of non-verbal communication.

7. Displays fine motor problems (cutting, writing, or pasting) when asked to conform or do structured tasks. Fine motor problems rarely appear when the child is doing something he has selected.

8. Is able to recall places and events but has difficulty in recalling symbolic representations such as names, letters, and numbers.

9. May have difficulty in phonics or decoding skills.

10. Is on the move most of the time.

11. Likes to work part-way out of his seat or standing up.

12. May exaggerate when retelling an event in which he has been involved.

13. Often has a messy desk.

14. Has difficulty in completing his work on time.

15. Likes to take things apart and put them back together again.

16. Displays impulsive behavior.

17. Tries to change the world to meet his own needs.

18. Likes to touch, trip, and poke when relating to other children.

19. Goes to the pencil sharpener often.

20. Gets lost coming to the classroom.

21. May forget what he went to his room to do.

22. May be very good in athletics but poor in subjects such as English.

23. Will give the right answer to a question but will be unable to tell you where it came from.

24. Will often give responses that are unrelated to what is being discussed.

25. May be a leader in the class.

26. May chew his tongue while working.

The author cautions, "Not all right-hemispheric children will display all of the above characteristics and children who are laterally balanced will display both left- and right-hemispheric characteristics. Temper any decision that you make about hemispheric dominance with the fact that there still is much to learn about the human brain."[5] However, might some "problem children" in your classes be right-brained learners?

"The Question" then becomes endless:

--Are we prepared to help <u>all kinds</u> of learners in foreign languages cope with this "global village" we talk about?

--Are we helping them understand process? (Rote memory is not process.)

--Are learners developing a sense of language, its origins, how it "hangs together" and how it evolves and changes?

--Are learners developing a sense of languages, similarities and differences, how each relates to its environment and to the others, how each language suits the needs of its speakers (e.g., many words in Shona meaning <u>to walk</u> and many in Eskimo meaning <u>snow</u>, and so on)? Are learners understanding that language is culture?

--How do learners relate their second language experiences to other parts of their school day (social studies, art, music, math, English)? Are they conceptualizing about some of the same things as in the others, or do they perceive second language learning as being totally "different"?

--Do learners recognize in printed form, words and phrases of their spoken vocabulary? Can they make inferences and project answers?

--In sum, are learners being helped in their second language classes to develop cognitive skills, conceptualizing skills, critical thinking skills which they will continue to use and remember, later and with satisfaction?

5. Ibid. p. 19

All this is not accomplished through wishful thinking; we must reexamine our strategies and our preparation.

If I could be given another life of being a teacher, that is of being a catalyst in the learning processes of young children, I would search other fields to find out all I could about:

--questioning strategies and the development of critical thinking skills,

--hemispheric dominance, right-brained approach to learning, how to meet the needs of children in relation to their hemispheric dominance, how to help them exercise both hemispheres,

--visual learners, auditory learners, haptic learners, how to help each kind,

--dyslexia, other learning "disabilities," what implications all this has for learners in a second language class,

--learner-oriented curricula, how to provide options for individual learning styles, needs and cultural background.

Most of all, I would want to be certain that teaching my way meant helping children learn their way. That does not mean being permissive! It does mean providing options, choices and an atmosphere in which they all can learn.

However, since I cannot begin again, what I must trust is that you are seeking the answers we need for our very young learners; we must not fail the future decision-makers of this Universe. It is wise to remember, as you proceed, the words of Kahlil Gabran: you may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own.

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